The Moral Significance

OF THE

CONTRASTS BETWEEN SLAVERY AND FREEDOM:

A

DISCOURSE

PREACHED IN THE FIRST CHURCH, DORCHESTER,

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This Discourse, following, in connection with others, upon a recent personal experience on the part of the preacher, is yielded for publication at the request of several of his parishioners.

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DISCOURSE.

Ps. lviii. 11: "VERILY THERE IS A GOD WHO JUDGETH IN THE EARTH."

I PROPOSE to speak this morning on another point comprised in the revelations and suggestions of that absence preceding the long disablement from which I have just returned to you. I would speak of the contrasts between slavery and freedom, as presented to the passing observer on their respective soils. It is necessary to a due appreciation of either condition to have seen both. "Seeing," most emphatically here, "is believing;" surely with a vividness of conviction else ungained.

It was among the compensations of an otherwise most irksome detention of a week and more in the capital of Tennessee, that I was brought into daily companionship with a circle of intelligent slaveholders, driven from their distant homes by the persecutions to which they were subjected for their Union sentiments; men to whom I was drawn, not alone for their uncowering and self-devoting loyalty, but also for general qualities of character, of which this was

THE BUFFALO HISTORY MUSEUM

a specific, as it was a most attractive, emanation. Among them was one with whom circumstances threw me into an especial intimacy; a man of fine intellectual powers and culture, of high moral qualities also, and a religious faith, — a Christian man: I do not hesitate to say it, (shame to me if I did!) slaveholder though he was. He had fled, for personal safety, from his extensive plantation in the interior of the State; leaving behind him a wife and daughters, and a remnant (some thirty) of his slaves. His only son, pride and joy of his heart, had been killed in the rebel ranks, — affliction doubly grievous to him. To his slaves he had said, on leaving them, "Stay or go, as you choose; you are free to do either; I claim no right to you:" and they, in a magnanimous kindness, characteristic of the race, — as he himself asserted, speaking from a life's contact with it, — had chosen to stay, that they might be, as they were, support and protection to his else helpless family. He had been all his life a cotton-planter in Tennessee and Alabama; had never, until the last summer, taken a step out of slavedom. He visited then the Middle States and New England; and he told me, with manly frankness, his impressions. He described the wonder with which he saw, wherever he went, the signs of a prosperity, a thrift, a comfort, competency, intelligence, refinement, which, in the measure of it, and the extent of its diffusion, he had formed

THE BUFFALO HISTORY MUSEUM

no conception of as ours; the wonder with which he saw what industry and enterprise, unforced, unbribed, had wrought, what natural obstacles they had overcome. "Why, Massachusetts," said he, "has less naturally good land in it, I verily believe, than my eight hundred acres at home, and yet so covered and crowned with fertility and plenty! and there, as elsewhere in all the North I saw, such noble cities, such flourishing villages, such intelligent populations, churches, schools, lyceums, libraries!"

And he saw all as the boon of Freedom. The grand underlying secret of this condition of things, in such striking contrast with what only he had known, it was written to him all over it as in sunbeams, — Freedom. These all were her clustering growths; their root, stimulus, sustainment, — freedom. He saw, as no statement could have convinced him, no mere showing in words, no axioms of political economy, no argument drawn from natural causes and effects, — he *saw* what freedom is and does for a people, what slavery is and *fails* to do. He was impressed more deeply than he could tell. The facts witnessed were uppermost in his thoughts wherever he went; ruled, possessed him.

His way homeward was by Niagara, — object he had longed for a lifetime to see; whose glories he had the taste to appreciate, and a heart to feel: but so entirely was he taken possession of by what he *had*

THE BUFFALO HISTORY MUSEUM

seen, so domineered over by Freedom's exhibitings and the thoughts they started, that he was in no mood to yield himself to, or feel, even those sublime attractions; and long before the time he had previously given himself — all too little, as he had then deemed — to linger there, had elapsed, he found himself pacing the platform of the station-house, lost in thought, oblivious to surrounding things. "I had seen something greater than Niagara," were his words to me. "And I returned," he said, "with my soul stirred and indignant at the thought of what slavery had deprived us of as a people; of the woful curse it is, viewing it only on its negative side and its more external aspects. I returned fired with the purpose to devote myself to securing emancipation, unqualified, uncompensated, for my State, as the only true policy, while it is the only righteous aim." And this I left him earnestly and efficiently doing, and, as a specific means thereto, laboring for the enlistment of the blacks. "We have given ourselves," he said, speaking for himself and his patriot associates, — whose patriotism had cost them something, had asserted itself against the pleadings of self-interest, against educated prejudices and sectional dislikes, — "we have given ourselves, heart and hand, to the arming of the negro. It was not of our origination; but we accept it as the policy of the Government, and as a legitimate mode of crushing the Rebellion,

THE BUFFALO HISTORY MUSEUM

and moreover as securing more surely and speedily the freedom of the slave. We are not disposed," he continued, "to discuss the merits of the antislavery movement, or the subject in general of slavery; but, if asked the question, we are free to answer, that, with our present light, we regard slavery as a crime, and this war and its terrible visitations as a providential retribution upon us for cherishing it."

The circumstances of this individual, reversely, were my own. Our conclusions were the same, approached from opposite quarters. We had been alike impressed by the contrasts between slavery and freedom; he coming from slavery's side to witness it, I from freedom's.

I saw a considerable portion of Kentucky, a larger one of Tennessee; passing through the latter State to where it touches Georgia, and spending nearly three weeks in almost constant movement and change of place within it, and with some especial opportunities, in the mode of movement, for observing the country and communicating with its population. Very limited still, I am aware, — amusingly so, perhaps, as an assumed basis for general conclusions, — were my opportunities; though I suppose Tennessee is no unfair representative of that unfortunate sisterhood of States which have made slavery their peculiar and pet institution. At any rate, I testify but to what I have seen of slavedom, in testifying to a condition of

THE BUFFALO HISTORY MUSEUM

things within it in striking and most suggestive contrast to that presented anywhere within the Republic where slavery is not; a condition of things not called into existence by the war, but existing previous to and independently of it. The remark is applicable to every department and sphere of life and living. Everywhere is an absence of more or less, but in every case much, of what has come with us to be regarded as among the indispensable attendants of the civilization of the century; a lack, I cannot say universally, but out of the principal cities and in general, of refinements, comforts, conveniences, which are a part of the daily enjoyment of all but the poorest among ourselves; a style of living below that of any class, *as* a class, in New England; an absence, not only of tasteful ornamentation and beautifying care, alike within dwelling and enclosure, but of that neatness, trimness, order, which mark humblest cottages on the soil of freedom. Unthrift — is the fact to which things inanimate testify of their human tenantry. Wretched — is the term which alone expresses the condition of the poorer whites, as also that of many a land-owner; while the owners of hundreds of acres are strangely without those appointments and furnishings of domestic life which are reckoned elsewhere as simply decent. It seems indeed to the Northern stranger that he has fallen back generations from the civilization he has left.

THE BUFFALO HISTORY MUSEUM

Nature is beautiful; and the autumnal sun was shining brightly and genially over valley and mountain, woodland and field, upon a soil eminently rich in the elements of a natural fertility, as attested by its spontaneous growths of gigantic measurement where cultivation had been suspended, and by the rich crops ripened beneath a tillage slovenly and imperfect, — crops which war, in its imperious necessities, regardless of all claim of ownership, was wastefully foraging; and yet, over all the landscape, there seemed to hang a shadow, as of a brooding curse, which no brightness from overarching skies could wholly lift. Nor was it a mere fancy, a shadow projected from within, in a knowledge of that actually existing curse which slavery is. You look in vain for objects which give its peculiar picturesqueness to Northern landscapes; which light up as with rays of intelligence their comparatively sorry and unluxuriant aspects, — objects which bespeak connections with science and art and taste and skill; which suggest a care, if not a supremacy of regard, for other than material things; the thriving village, nestling among the hills, or spreading over the plain, or rising along the stream, whose aid it seeks to waken its ponderous mechanism to all but intelligent life and productiveness; villages all and each with their painted dwellings, their neatly fenced enclosures, their gardens and shrubbery, their spire-topped churches, their commodious school-

THE BUFFALO HISTORY MUSEUM

houses, and a thousand fair and blessed things indigenous to freedom's soil; and, in a closer and more interior view, you miss the presence of books, pamphlets, newspapers, intellectual aid and resource of every sort, — that which finds its way into the humblest homes of our obscurest towns. It is not a mere difference of manners, habits, pursuits, speech, you notice, but of ideas as well, — ideas respecting life and living, society, government, truth, right; a difference in the degree of mental hopefulness and activity, in breadth of mental outlook and appreciation, in moral interest and earnestness. You seem to yourself to have come among a different nation, upon a different age; among those who have been slumbering, while the rest of the world has moved on.

The contrasts between slavery and freedom is a theme which may be unfolded into innumerable particulars. I have touched upon those simply which are most obvious to the transient wayfarer. I have done it, not as a matter of mere cursory interest, still less for the encouragement of sectional pride and boastfulness, but for its moral bearings and significance. The Almighty has not confined to a Book the disclosures of his will. His statutes are recorded on a broader page. He etches them pictorially upon the walls of Nature. He inweaves them, by the restless shuttle of events, into the very fabric and texture of society; and they who run may read them. God's providence

THE BUFFALO HISTORY MUSEUM

is moral in its issues. His laws are all retributive in their operations. In a sense deeper and subtler than we think, "he rules the world in righteousness." Wrong-doing insures its own defeat — always, and in the long-run. A selfish disallowance of others' rights is the costliest of indulgences. It doesn't pay: it never does. The *workers* of iniquity share with the objects of it its natural evils, while its moral are all their own: —

"Sorrow tracketh wrong,
As echo follows song."

No community can establish a system of wrong and oppression within its borders, without suffering for it in all its departments. There is no interest, public or private, that shall be excepted; no class or individual, however fenced around in fancied isolation. "Heaven condescends to teach us the mere *economy* of morality." A community cannot *afford* to institute injustice for any portion of its people. The Almighty Providence lifts at that hour its retributive scourge, sure to fall, sooner or later, in manifold infliction, with the sureness of fate. So wondrously interwoven, by the impartial Father, are human interests, that each suffers with all, and all with each. The depression to which a class is subjected, in order to the greater elevation of the rest, is certain to end in the depression of the whole. The slave's tether is fastened to his master. The blows that keep him at his heartless toil rebound

THE BUFFALO HISTORY MUSEUM

upon those who order them. Coerced and bondaged labor affixes the badge of degradation upon *all* labor; confining it to the servile class, making the rest idlers, who consume the fruits of industry, without adding to them; adding nothing comparatively to any of the departments of social and civil wealth. The mental darkness that slavery necessitates for its victims, lest the admitted light should waken them too broadly to a consciousness of manhood, — its worth, capabilities, destinies, — and thus depreciate their value as brute stock, — it necessitates the entailment of ignorance and debasement over a *wider* surface. It exists at the terrible cost of a denial of education to the masses generally; of a repression, if they chance to arise, of all aspirings after its blessed favors. Knowledge comes to be regarded as a foe, inimical to the public interest, peace, safety; comes to be suspected, hated, hunted down, challenged, expelled. Common schools are accounted a nuisance, and their non-existence a claim for congratulation.

Such is the moral significance of the contrasts between slavery and freedom. Thus do they yield illustration and proof that God governs the world in righteousness. "Verily there is a God who judgeth in the earth."

Let not the view presented lead us of the North to a taunting self-complacency at our freedom and the fruits of it, to any vain-glorying on account of it.

THE BUFFALO HISTORY MUSEUM

Forbid it, Honor, Justice, Truth! Freedom was our heritage, the lot that fell to us. We did not win, we found it. Purchased indeed it was, at precious cost; but not by *our* blood and treasure and sufferings and sacrifices. We have simply kept it, and not so much kept it as been kept *by* it. What merit in that? What merit in just being what Freedom, under God, has made us? in merely taking the good wrought out beneath her influences? the privileges, opportunities, incentives, which are her legitimate attendants? What have we *done* for Freedom, in return for what she has done for us? What are we doing for her *now*, in this day of her perilous struggle, when she is stretching out her hands to us imploringly, and by the memories of the past, and the hopes of the future, pleads for a self-consecration to her service? nay, rather, — let rhetorical personification go, for the naked truth, — when the *living God* is imploring us, for our fidelity at once to freedom and to him.

For myself, while, as I looked hitherward from that slavery-cursed region, Freedom never seemed so lovely, nor its children so blessed, and my heart glowed with thankfulness for my New-England heritage, yet I felt moved to pity rather than blame those whose misfortune, and not whose fault, it is, that they were born to a heritage in such saddening contrast; misfortune whose deeper depth is indicated in the fact, that, save by here and there one, it is not felt as such.

THE BUFFALO HISTORY MUSEUM

Pity, — I could not justify myself in cherishing a severer feeling; not *then*, certainly, when I saw them partaking, in the war and its ravages, of the bitter fruits, and most legitimate, of their wicked institution. Pity, at least for the many; and for the rest, — for the rest, too, pity, tempering the indignation which cannot be repressed, as we are human, as we are divine, in view of a malicious baseness in cruelty and wrong (a part of the curse their institution has wrought upon them); and admiration, admiration, for those (not a few), who, having come to see the truth, are so heroically faithful to it; who, alike in the depth of their antislavery convictions and their martyr-like devotion to them and to the Union, are examples that should put to shame those — alas that there are such even in our New England! — who see in freedom no appealing worth, that they should arouse themselves in its behalf; who have not yet made the first real willing sacrifice for it; and who murmur that they are forced to aid at all in this mighty crisis of a nation's fate. Shame, shame on such!

The great consoling thought that came to me, as I looked upon that land, so fair and fertile by nature, and upon its people, so forlornly wretched by slavery and its war, was of the beneficent change so soon to come there; of the thronging blessings for which war's iron hand was to unbar the door; of the day when, beneath the risen orb of Liberty, those hills and val-

THE BUFFALO HISTORY MUSEUM

leys should be clothed with the prosperities and gifts that spring but at its genial shining; when labor, no more an accounted degradation, should be universally honored, as it is ever honorable; when the landscape, no longer dreary with overgrown plantations, should be studded and starred with multitudinous homesteads, in the ownership of their occupants, while smiling villages should reach toward each other, in friendly neighborhood and ever-increasing proximity; when intelligence should be a diffused possession, — knowledge, no more than land, a monopoly of the few; when a people, receiving to themselves the peaceful hosts of immigration, foreign and native, whom climate and soil and position and resources shall have drawn thither, bringing with them and fostering into free and vigorous life the noblest growths of civilization and Christianity, should lift up their voices in thanksgiving to Heaven, that, through the agonizing throes of civil war, they had come to a new birth and a glorious transfiguration.

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